Volume 11, Issue 27 Atari Online News, Etc. July 3, 2009

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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1127 07/03/09

~ Happy 4th of July!!! ~ People Are Talking! ~ More Click Fraud!
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, it’s the July 4th weekend already, and the weather still stinks! Granted, the sun was out for a few hours today, so naturally the thunderstorms rolled in to end that quickly! In the month of June, we had a total of three sunny days! Not bad!

My mother-in-law is here for the week, and I have to work on the 4th! Keeps getting better! Well, I’m hoping that it will be a quiet night at work, but I’m not counting on it!

So, a lot of feedback regarding my comments about Michael Jackson last week. Apparently no one cares or no one is a Jacko fan. That’s fine, we’re all going to be inundated with Michael stories for months to come. You poor, sad people.

Enough of that! It’s a long holiday weekend, at least for some of you. Let the barbecues begin, may your beer be always cold, and the rains keep away (at least long enough for your burgers to cook!)! Have a safe and enjoyable holiday!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and I’ve got a few things I want to talk about before we get to the UseNet stuff.

Yeah, I know, not exactly what you were hoping, but... tough. [grin]

First, I’d like to apologize for my lack of presence last week, but there’s a new arrival in the house now, that things were just a little crazy. No, no, not

what you’re thinking. We’ve got another rescued dog now, and getting her settled in made things quite hectic.

She’s been doing pretty well, settling in with our other dog, who was also a ’rescue’. If you’re in the market for a dog, folks, please consider adopting one from a rescue organization. Yeah, pure breeds are good for bragging rights,

I guess, but there’s nothing like a good old fashioned mutt. Really. It’s been my experience that they’re all-around healthier than their purebred counterparts, just as smart and, if you happen to rescue them, so much more meaningful to you.

The one we just ’adopted’ was in rough shape. She’s less than five years old and has spent the last four years in a crate, getting out only to do its business outside and wolf down its dollar store dog chow. Then, back into the crate to spend another 23 hours and fifty minutes without interaction with anything other than itself.

It’s only been a week, but she’s making excellent progress, and is socialized pretty well with her new ’sister’. Luckily for her, dogs do not dwell in the past. They make the most of what they have right in front of them. Even after only a week, to look at her now, you’d never know that she’d spent more time in

a crate than John McCain. She’s happy. She gets to interact with people and with another dog, and her life is what it should have been all along.

So please, if you’re considering getting a dog, think about rescuing one that really needs your help. I know, you always thought it’d be nice to get a puppy instead of a full grown dog. And yes, it does have its merit. But puppies need training... Lots of training. They pee on the floor, they get into things, and they have very very short attention spans.

Adult dogs, on the other hand, have usually been trained at least a bit, learn not to pee on the floor more quickly, are attentive and centered on doing what you want them to do. The chances for a puppy being adopted are much higher than

for an adult dog, due to the ’awwwww’ factor. Do yourself and a dog a favor by choosing a grown one who really wants to fit into your family.

To quote Forest Gump, that’s about all I have to say about that.

Let’s get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet, shall we?

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

’Geek’ asks:

"Just wondering if anyone here, besides myself, has pre-ordered or plans to get

the Atari Coldfire board."

Jo Even Skarstein replies:

"I haven’t pre-ordered, but I definitely plan to buy one. I hope to make a laptop out of it!"

Vincent Rivi^¤re adds:

"I was skeptical at first, but the association ColdFire + FPGA makes the ACP board very powerful and extremely versatile ! It could be reprogrammed as a "hardware" emulator for virtually any older machine. The small size and the very

low power consumption of the board certainly makes it suitable for a laptop.

Look at what this guy does with an original C64 board:
http://benheck.com/04-05-2009/commodore-64-original-hardware-laptop
Imagine such thing with the ACP board!"

Jo Even replies:

"Indeed. A friend of mine is also going to buy one just for this reason. I don't know anything about VHDL/FPGA but I think it will be an interesting experience. The MSX One-Chip became a cult classic because of this."

Lonny Pursell adds:

"Never fails to amaze me what people spend their free time on. Cool. Although I prefer the Atari 8-bit laptop that I've seen on the net as well."

Vincent asks Lonny:

"Did you see this nice video about the Atari 800 laptop?
http://www.benheck.com/Videos/Atari800Laptop.mov "

Edward Baiz tells Lonny:

"Hopefully we will not see a repeat like the Hades060 with the first batch being sent out with problems. I hope Fredi learned his lesson and will strive to make it all right in the first shot."

Lonny replies:

"Well this one will be somewhat based on FPGA, which makes doing fixes easier. TOS updates and chips done in FPGA can then be flash updated by the end user. No buying chips or shipping it anywhere.

Can't say as I've had any such issues with my Hades, but then I did get it rather late in the game, just before it went out of production."

Vincent adds:

"Furthermore, the RAM will be soldiered on the ACP board, it will be rock solid,

no bad connections."

'Phantom' asks about the ST cartridge port:

"Does anyone know if a TOS cartridge was made for the ST? If so, any info on it

would be interesting to read about.

Also, I’m interested in any known past uses if any, for the "cartridge" part of

TOS.

Example, on ST with no hard drive connected, if you try to add a Drive C: it relates to "cartridge". Is this "cartridge" connected in TOS to the actual hardware cartridge port?

Or is this "cartridge" something different?"

’PPera’ tells Phantom:

"As is said, cartridge has no enough space for TOS. In theory, it could hold some TOS extension, update, but I never heard about such.

However, there is little confusion with that ’C’ for cartridge. It is shown as low case ’c’, not capital. With reason - it is not like C drive (hard disk). Cartridge handle in TOS supports only access to executables from Desktop. You can not open some other file. So, it is not equal as partition C. And it is logical, as c and C is actually same for filesystem. In other words, cartridge holds not regular files.

There are few games realised on cartridges, but not from big publishers. Actually, cart port for gaming, SW is not really interesting on Atari ST. It was popular on machines without floppies. And with hard disk it has especially not sense.

Usually, you have only EPROM chips with proper content on cartridges. ROM cartridge can operate in 2 modes: diagnostic and TOS mode. And I think that diagnostic is where it is most used - for helping finding what is broken in Ataris. In TOS mode it is possible to set at which point of startup program activates, so can hold some drivers which will install before AUTO run - such is Paskud (IDE IF for cartridge).

Cartridge is intended for EPROMs and holding some smaller SW by Atari, but as we see there are some special things made for. Beside paskud was IDE CD ROM IF, digitizers etc. Now we have some Ethernet/USB IF ...

Considering games on cartridge: if you want something like that, and I saw that people thinks that it is cool idea, here are some hints: You can put on cartridge any game what can stay in 128KB (but can SFX pack it of course), and is only 1, executable file. There is a lot of such games, and it is possible to ’singlepart’ many of them. Then you can run them from cartridge, whether with AUTO start, whether by double-click. For instance: Battlezone (Atari) is short, and one part."

Michael Schwingen explains:

"...You can have a cartridge that installs a driver which makes the cartridge show up as a regular drive - like a ramdisk or harddisk, only read-only. In that case, it will use any available drive letter from "C" up, just like any other disk drive - BTDT.

Using bankswitching, you can have more then 128k, and with a driver that maps the disk as a normal drive, this will be transparent to the application

- if it runs from harddisk, it will run from such a cartridge."

PPera replies:

"That’s all correct. But we should clarify things about basic cartridge usage first - as Atari designed it.

In fact, you may install some RAMdisk with content depacked from cartridge ROM. Then is may be read/write in RAM, for temporal usage. And of course, it may be more than 128KB by using bank switch. Only that we can not write changes back to cartridge..... Wait.... It can be possible if we use Flash EPROMs. Even if write is not supported it can be achieved via tricks.

However, at this point we are almost reached attaching some CF card to cartridge port. - For sure it is much better considering price/ capacity ratio, and can have straight regular filesystem access. Paskud done it years ago."

Well folks, that’s it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time,

same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - "Asteroids" Lands at Universal!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Is it All or Nothing?
  Frag Doll Wannabe!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Is it All or Nothing for Game Releases in 2009?

Eidos life president Ian Livingstone has declared it’s "all or nothing for new releases in 2009," painting either a blithely Machiavellian or cynically gloomy picture of the video games industry this year, depending on your vantage. Think, in other words, of the games industry in 2009 as a giant cattle pen - standing room for mega-hits only, electric prods in the employ of marketing monoliths. Publishers are pouring everything into a handful of lucrative franchises (you know their names) driving less well-known titles off the shelves, or into dark, forgettable little

corners - out of sight and mind entirely.

"I think we'll continue to see more production resources going into fewer titles supported by even bigger marketing budgets," said Livingstone. "Publishers are continuing to raise the investment bar, ensuring the mega-franchises will rule."

One bankroll to rule them all, then, and marketing plans guaranteed to ensure you'll inevitably trip over blinking Flash ads and splashy comic book endpapers and raucous pre-movie trailers flaunting the latest expansions or sequels to games like Quarter-Life, or BioZap, or World of Whatever. In the meantime, debatably more intrepid and intriguing games you've probably never heard of, say Machinarium or Between or Blueberry Garden will languish in small-potatoes "indie-land," enjoying the occasional award-ista attaboys and back claps, but none of the commercial attention secured by multimillion dollar marketing plans.

Eidos's Livingstone - better known to guys like me for his 1980s series of Fighting Fantasy game books - seems sympathetic to the plight of those little guys, but - probably because he's "life president" of a major publisher with a vested interest in said multimillion dollar marketing plans - ends up carrying the industry water when defining "success."

"There's a glut of product and in a discerning market there is no room for mediocrity," he says, adding that "To make a suboptimal game with a suboptimal marketing spend is a recipe for disaster."

That makes basic market sense, sure, but Livingstone's definition of mediocrity is almost myopically economic. If "optimal" equals games like Mass Effect (mediocre by my ruler but massively successful in spite of it) as opposed to EA's Mirror's Edge (first rate by the same ruler, but a fraction as successful as Mass Effect) then I'm not sure I'm ready to buy the conventional wisdom anymore than I'm hot to trot for the latest Britney Spears or Lady Gaga albums.

Brand awareness certainly translates as power in our consumer economy. I just finished the new Guillermo del Toro (Pan's Labyrinth, Hellboy 2) and Chuck Hogan (Prince of Thieves) wannabe vampire "reinvent" The Strain. It's not completely awful, but it's awfully close. I wouldn't have known about it or cared if publisher William Morrow hadn't turned up the publicity volume to eardrum-popping levels and I doubt anyone would've made much of it without del Toro or Hogan's names attached. For better or worse, it's become 2009's Summer Book Event. The Birth of a Franchise (it's the first in a trilogy). The thing you need, if only because everyone else "memetically" says so.

But is that the future you're excited about? A handful of mega-brands dominating the landscape? Games whose titles includes the same old perennials? Titles derived from words like "Warcraft" and "Sims" and "Counter-Strike"?

Do you ever quietly want more? Are we excusing mediocre game design to justify a kind of lazy escapism? Because the design bar's so low, still today, that we get weak-kneed when someone trots out a game as seemingly "deep" as BioShock, a game that for all its stylish levels and dystopian grandstanding was still dishing out recycled tropes, decades old game mechanics, and at best, timid polemic?

"Asteroids" Lands at Universal

Universal Pictures has won a four-studio bidding war to pick up the film rights to the classic Atari video game "Asteroids."

Matthew Lopez will write the script for the feature adaptation.

In "Asteroids," originally released as an arcade game in 1979, a player controlled a triangular spaceship in an asteroid field. The object was to shoot and destroy the hulking masses of rock and the occasional flying saucer while avoiding smashing into both.

As opposed to today's games, there is no story line or fancy world-building mythology, so the studio would be creating a plot from scratch. Universal is familiar with such a development process: It's in the middle of doing just that for several of the Hasbro board-game properties it's translating to the big screen, among them "Battleship" and "Candyland."

Lopez came out of Disney's writing program and worked on that studio's recent movies "Bedtime Stories" and "Race to Witch Mountain." He also wrote the most recent draft of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," currently in production with Nicolas Cage and Jay Baruchel starring.

Frag Doll Wannabe: One Woman's Quest to Become a Girl-Gamer Idol

From March to May, Kristin Reilly spent her spare time doing two things: perfecting her deadly aim in first-person shooters, and smiling for the camera. Reilly had joined the running to become a Frag Doll, a group of highly skilled and - not accidentally - very attractive female gamers sponsored by game publisher Ubisoft. Reilly planned to secure the position with as much precision as a sniper lining up a headshot.

For her application, Reilly, a former cohost of gaming podcast On The Spot, scrounged up old publicity photos. She wrote an essay about her long history as a gamer. She trained on titles such as Ubisoft's Rainbow Six Vegas 2 for weeks. She pulled out her digital camcorder to record a video discussing her aspirations to serve as a role model for young girls who want to kick ass.

A 28-year-old from Oregon, Reilly had been working as a video producer for GameSpot.com and a community manager for Hewlett-Packard before she was laid off this spring. She planned to go back to school but hoped that a spot on the Frag Dolls would let her keep a high heel in the games industry. Reilly knew the seven Dolls from industry events and the pro-gaming circuit, where they alternate between staffing Ubisoft's booths and dominating mostly male opponents at Ubisoft games. Beautiful in person, merciless in gameplay, and accustomed to the limelight, Reilly thought she would fit right in.

She was not alone. More than 90 women responded to the casting call - more than Morgan Romine, head Frag Doll, expected. "We were asking for a lot," Romine says, "someone who can hold their own competitively ... someone who can help us create content for our Web site," but also someone who was passionate, personable, and marketing-savvy. With only two open spots to fill, cutting candidates proved hard. Romine and the

other dolls settled on 18 semifinalists, all beautiful and energetic. Reilly made the list.

That’s when the real competition began, Reilly says. "The finalists tests were very intense. There was a phone interview, which was about 40 minutes long. There was also a games test."

Given a list of first-person shooters, the prospective Dolls had four days to prepare, after which they were thrown together in free-for-all and team matches to see whose competitive skills held up. Death tolls aren’t everything, according to Romine, but it’s important that the Dolls have solid gaming skills. Critics have called them nothing more than "booth babes with controllers," and they often have to prove their hard-core cred.

The semifinalists also had to face the members of the Frag Dolls community, who were casting their own votes for the women they wanted to see succeed. Ubisoft’s favorite girls have a loyal following of fans who not only come talk with them at events but also play with them online, converse on their forums at FragDolls.com, and populate their IRC chats. These guys (and, not surprisingly, for the most part they are guys, ages 18 to 34) are a close-knit bunch, and wary of outsiders. As a result, applicants had to brave what Reilly called "hateful" rounds of hazing. "I was definitely nicer than I normally would be. I let stuff roll off my back a lot more," she says. "The IRC chat room, it’s not moderated, so if you go in there, you go in at your own risk."

Andrew Jiang, a longtime community member who has followed the Dolls across the country, defends the approach of his fellow forum goers. What’s most important in picking a new Frag Doll isn’t how pretty she is or how well she plays, he says, but seeing how she fits into the community.

Reilly felt like she was fitting in pretty well. Then came the bad news. Romine and her fellow Frag Dolls had decided on the six finalists who were going to E3, and Reilly wasn’t one of them. She was out of the running; Romine told her she needed more of a marketing sensibility.

Reilly says she was more angry about the decision than crushed. In the few weeks following the announcement, she launched a small campaign to be reconsidered for the position; but she also found a new job, working full-time as a community manager for a casual games Web site.

On the Friday following the end of E3, Romine announced the two new Frag Dolls, Lanai Gara and Anne Marie Sackley. Gara, who has adopted the Frag Doll name Fidget, has been ranked number one in the world in Call of Duty: World at War. Sackley, known as Spectra, works in the movie industry and, like a Miss America contestant, has taken on a cause: left-handed gamers. Her bio reads: "As a Frag Doll, Spectra would like to raise industry awareness to the needs of the left-handed gamer, in hopes that left-handed controller options would one day become an industry standard for all games."

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The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Apple CEO Jobs Back at Work

Apple’s iconic chief executive Steve Jobs has returned to work after a five-month medical leave of absence during which he underwent a liver transplant.

"Steve is back to work," Steve Dowling, an Apple spokesman, told AFP on Monday. "He is currently at Apple a few days a week and working from home the remaining days.

"We are very glad to have him back," Dowling said, declining to provide any further details.

The 54-year-old Jobs, the visionary behind the wildly successful Macintosh computer, iPhone and iPod, announced in January that he was taking a leave of absence to deal with "complex" health issues.

Apple has declined to release any further information about Jobs’s health since the January announcement but a Tennessee hospital confirmed last week that he had received a liver transplant.

It said Jobs was "now recovering well and has an excellent prognosis."

Apple has been notoriously secretive about Jobs’s health since he underwent an operation in 2004 for pancreatic cancer.

Apple last week released the first public comment from Jobs since he went on medical leave, a brief statement in which he lauded the sales of Apple’s latest model iPhone.

Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple Computer in the garage of the Jobs family home in 1976 and the company’s fortunes have been uniquely linked to Jobs, who returned to the California company in 1997 after a 12-year absence and turned around the flagging technology giant.

Under Jobs, the company introduced its first Apple computers and then the Macintosh, which became wildly popular in the 1980s.

Jobs left Apple in 1985 after an internal power struggle and started NeXT Computer company specializing in sophisticated workstations for businesses. He co-founded Academy-Award-winning Pixar in Emeryville, California, in 1986.

Walt Disney Company bought Pixar in 2006 in a 7.4-billion-dollar deal that gave Jobs a seat on its board of directors and made him the entertainment titan’s biggest single shareholder.

Network Shutdown Bill Faces Changes, Aide Says

A bill in the U.S. Senate that would allow President Barack Obama to shut down parts of the Internet during a cybersecurity crisis will

likely be rewritten and needs input from private businesses, said a congressional staff member associated with the legislation.

The Cybersecurity Act of 2009, introduced in April by Senators Jay Rockefeller, a West Virginia Democrat, and Olympia Snowe, a Maine Republican, contains "imperfect" language, said Ellen Doneski, chief of staff for the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

The bill, among other things, allows the U.S. president to "declare a cybersecurity emergency and order the limitation or shutdown of Internet traffic to and from any compromised Federal Government or United States critical infrastructure information system or network." The sponsors of the bill are looking for input on that section and other parts of the bill, said Doneski, who works for Rockefeller, the committee chairman.

That section of the bill was an attempt to put into law who has the ultimate authority for protecting U.S. cyberinfrastructure, Doneski said Friday at a cybersecurity forum sponsored by Google and the Center for New American Security, a Washington, D.C., think tank. "We were trying to state the obvious: In an extreme cyberemergency or attack, the president ultimately has constitutional authority to protect the country," she said. "It really wasn't meant to go beyond that."

Other speakers at Friday's event said they welcomed new attention on cybersecurity by members of Congress and especially Obama. The president's speech in late May, accompanied by a cybersecurity policy review, was "game-changing," said Christopher Painter, cybersecurity director at the U.S. National Security Council.

Personal attention by Obama will drive cybersecurity changes in the U.S. government, Painter said.

"By far, the most important part of it was executive attention," added Philip Reitinger, deputy undersecretary for national protection and programs at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Nothing is more important for driving change in an organization ... than executive attention."

While the White House will get a cybersecurity director under Obama's plan, DHS will continue to have significant cybersecurity authority. The agency's cybersecurity goals include hiring more people with network security experience and developing a more comprehensive cybersecurity recovery plan, Reitinger said.

Reitinger and other speakers also talked about an oft-mentioned goal for cybersecurity: public/private partnerships. While Painter suggested that the term has lost its meaning, Reitinger said DHS and private companies need to better share information about attacks and vulnerabilities with each other.

Those partnerships need to be ongoing and sustained, not just come together to respond to an attack, said Liesyl Franz, vice president for information security and global public policy at TechAmerica, a tech trade group. Those partnerships need to be in place "so if something happens, there's an organic way to respond," she said.

The Obama administration is moving cautiously on a new pilot program that would both detect and stop cyber attacks against government computers, while trying to ensure citizen privacy protections.

The pilot program, known as Einstein 3, was supposed to launch in February. But the Department of Homeland Security is still pulling the plan together, according to senior administration officials.

Einstein 3 has triggered debate and privacy concerns because the program will use National Security Agency technology, which is already being employed on military networks.

Any involvement of the NSA - the agency oversees electronic intelligence-gathering - in protecting domestic computer networks worries privacy and civil liberties groups who oppose giving such control to U.S. spy agencies.

Officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the program is still being finalized, said that while the technology will come from the NSA, the program will be managed and run by the Department of Homeland Security. The monitoring would be limited to government systems and any Internet traffic moving in and out of them.

The latest developments in the Einstein 3 program were first reported Thursday on The Washington Post’s Web site.

"The NSA will provide technical assistance," Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told reporters. "We absolutely intend to use the technical resources, the substantial ones that NSA has."

Einstein 1, which is currently in use by DHS, is an automated program designed to detect intrusions into government networks, and Einstein 2, which is now being put in place, is a more advanced system for detection. It is being used now by about five of the higher risk government agencies, one senior official said.

Einstein 3 would be designed to not only detect intrusions, but to stop them - preventing any malicious computer codes from getting into government networks and stopping any data theft from those systems. The key, said officials, is that the focus of the monitoring and prevention program is not the content of e-mails, but any codes attached to e-mails that could infect the system or steal information.

Ari Schwartz, a vice president of the Center for Democracy and Technology, said Thursday that privacy advocates want to ensure that as the government begins to more aggressively protect its computer systems, it follows the law, and does not look into private systems.

"There are a number of concerns that come with this process, the main one being how do you go about protecting the system in a way that insures you’re not monitoring private systems," said Schwartz. "I don’t have a full answer to that question. But the president made that pledge. That makes me more comfortable that it won’t happen."

The planned deployment of the new Einstein 3 program was noted in the administration’s recently released cyber security review. The 60-day review said the government would continue to consult with privacy and civil liberties groups as the program moves forward.

Obama released the review saying that cyber threats are one of the most serious economic and national security challenges faced by the nation. And he said he will name a new cyber coordinator for the federal government.

Web Retailers, States Tussle Over Tax Rules

In a big break for online shoppers, Web retailers generally don't have to charge sales taxes in states where they lack a store or some other physical presence.

Increasingly, states aching under the weight of the recession are seeking a way around that rule. Because companies like Amazon.com Inc. get help drumming up sales from online affiliates - people who link to products on their blogs, promote Web shopping deals and offer coupons - several states say the Internet retailers should charge sales taxes in states where those affiliates are based.

The financial benefits may not be quite what the states anticipate, though. Rather than gearing up to collect taxes, Amazon and other Web retailers are simply shutting down their affiliate marketing programs. As the small businesses that participate in these programs get cut off, a state could lose tax revenue rather than add to it.

A look at what the affiliates do helps explain why. They're just one of several methods that e-commerce companies have for driving visitors to their Web sites, so nixing them is not necessarily a big loss for the companies.

It's a far bigger deal to people like Rich Owings.

By running Web sites like GPSTracklog.com from his home in Asheville, N.C., Owings serves as an affiliate for Amazon and other companies. Owings, 53, spends most of his time reviewing GPS gadgets and covering industry news. He links to navigation products of his choosing on Amazon's site, and if his readers click through and buy one, he gets a commission.

Owings estimates he brought in about $80,000 in affiliate revenue from various companies in 2008, about $50,000 of which came from Amazon. After Amazon recently shuttered its North Carolina affiliate program in response to that state's attempt to collect sales taxes, Owings said he and his wife were thinking about heading elsewhere to run their business.

"We're terrified," he said. "We just bought a house here a year ago and we're looking at having to move out of state just to keep our business going."

The amount of money at stake overall for state governments is somewhat murky. According to a recent University of Tennessee study, uncollected state and local taxes from online sales could total $7 billion this year. However, only a small part of this would stem from consumer purchases, because transactions between businesses make up the bulk of e-commerce sales. (Consumers are generally supposed to pay a "use tax" themselves on online purchases, but few do.)

Because any extra revenue is precious, several states, such as New York, have passed laws seeking to cash in on Web retailers' affiliate

relationships, while others are considering doing so.

Amazon cut off affiliates in North Carolina in late June, anticipating legislation requiring it to collect sales tax will soon pass there. The company has also stopped working with affiliates in Rhode Island and Hawaii because of similar laws that already have passed. Discount retailer Overstock.com Inc. and jewelry marketer Blue Nile Inc. also closed down affiliate programs in Hawaii, Rhode Island and North Carolina, and Overstock stopped working with affiliates in New York last year.

(Hawaii's Republican governor, Linda Lingle, vetoed the bill Wednesday, so Amazon, Blue Nile and Overstock.com said Thursday they plan to reinstate affiliates there if the state's Democratic majority does not override Lingle's decision.)

Rebecca Madigan, founder of the Camarillo, Calif.-based Performance Marketing Alliance, which represents affiliate marketers, called the new state rules "pretty devastating." Echoing opinions of several online retailers and associates, Madigan argues that the nation's estimated 200,000 affiliate marketers are advertisers, not salespeople.

"They don't deliver product, they don't take any money from a consumer, and most of the time they don't even know who the consumer is," she said. Because the tax crackdown could curtail the business generated by affiliates, "the states are sort of shooting themselves in the feet," she said.

That's not how the states see it. In 2008, New York started requiring retailers to collect sales tax if they solicit business in the state by paying anyone there for leading customers to them. Matt Anderson, spokesman for the state's Division of the Budget, said New York expected the change would bring in $23 million for the fiscal year that ended March 31, and estimates $34 million for the current fiscal year.

"We believe we have to keep the tax code in line with technology, and that online retailers shouldn't have an unfair competitive advantage over off-line businesses," he said.

Amazon and Overstock sued New York in 2008, arguing it unlawfully imposes tax-collection obligations on out-of-state entities. A judge dismissed the cases in January, and Amazon is collecting taxes in New York. The company has not shuttered its associate program there.

North Carolina expects it could collect an additional $13.2 million in the coming fiscal year on sales generated by Web retailers that use affiliates, and from a new sales tax on downloads of music, video and software, according to a legislative fiscal analysis.

But while states may see these marketing programs as a way to shore up budgets, they're just one way these companies drive visitors to their Web sites. Companies also use ads on Google and links on comparison shopping sites.

Patrick Byrne, head of Salt Lake City-based Overstock, said sales made through affiliates account for less than 10 percent of Overstock's revenue. The amount of business it will lose by cutting about 8,000 of its 25,000 affiliates loose is a "small fraction" of what it would have to start collecting in taxes if it kept the affiliates, he said.

Judy Browning, 66, worries she's done collecting affiliate revenue from

Amazon for her Vegetable Goddess Web site, which she runs from Honolulu. Browning did not want to say how much money she had been getting from Amazon, other than to call it a "tremendous" opportunity for her.

"If I don't get paid by Amazon, then I'm not making money," she said. "If I'm not making money, I can't spend money."

China Postpones Controversial Web Filter

China postponed a plan to require personal computer makers to supply Internet-filtering software Tuesday, retreating in the face of protests by Washington and Chinese Web surfers just hours before it was due to take effect.

The rule would have required manufacturers to include filtering software known as Green Dam with every computer produced for sale in China starting Wednesday.

A two-sentence announcement by the government's Xinhua News Agency said regulators "will delay" the plan but gave no indication whether it might take effect later. It gave no other details.

Top U.S. trade officials protested the plan as a possible trade barrier. Industry groups warned that the software might cause security problems. Free-speech advocates attacked the plan as censorship.

American diplomats met earlier with Chinese officials to express concern about the plan.

Chinese authorities said Green Dam is needed to shield children from violent and obscene material online. But analysts who have reviewed the program say it also contains code to filter out material the government considers politically objectionable.

Chinese Web surfers ridiculed the software and circulated petitions online appealing to Beijing to scrap its order. They said Green Dam would block access to photos of animals and other innocuous subjects.

Producers including Toshiba Corp. and Taiwan's Acer Inc. said they were ready to provide Green Dam on disk with personal computers beginning Wednesday. But industry leaders Hewlett-Packard Inc. and Dell Inc. had avoided making public commitments, possibly waiting for a diplomatic settlement.

China's communist government encourages Internet use for education and business, and the country has the biggest population of Web users, with more than 298 million. But authorities try to block access to material deemed obscene or subversive and Beijing operates the world's most sweeping system of Internet filtering. The new software would have raised those controls to a new level by putting the filter inside each computer.

A California company, Solid Oak Software Inc., complained that some of its software was illegally used in Green Dam. The company said it was preparing for possible legal action if the plan went ahead.

The general manager of Green Dam developer Jinhui Computer System

Engineering Co., Zhang Chenmin, declined to comment on the American software company’s claim.

China is important to personal computer makers both as a major manufacturing site and a fast-growing market. It accounts for up to 80 percent of world production.

The Green Dam initiative coincides with a tightening of government controls on Internet use.

Last week, the Health Ministry ordered health-related Web sites that carry research on sexually oriented topics to allow access only to medical professionals.

Also last week, the government issued new rules on "virtual currency" used by some game Web sites, saying it cannot be used to purchase real goods.

Green Dam already is in use in Internet cafes in China and has been installed since the start of this year in PCs sold under a government program that subsidizes appliance sales in the countryside, according to manufacturers and news reports.

"All the computers in this ’Appliances to the countryside’ program had this installed or received it on disk," said Yi Juan, a spokeswoman for Great Wall Computer Ltd., a leading domestic PC manufacturer.

Yi said she had no details on how many computers were sold with the software or whether users reported problems. Asked whether customers knew PCs had Internet filters, she said she did not know whether they were informed, but said, "they should know."

The Chinese press has reported extensively on the domestic criticism, an unusual step in a system where the entirely government-controlled media usually promote official policy.

Judge Temporarily Dismisses MySpace Cyberbully Case

A U.S. judge on Friday overruled a jury verdict and dismissed a case against a Missouri woman convicted last November in a cyberbullying case that led to a teenager’s death, according to published reports.

U.S. District Court Judge George Wu granted a defense motion for a directed acquittal of Lori Drew, 50, who was convicted last November on three misdemeanor counts of unauthorized computer access. After reviewing transcripts of the case, Wu overturned the jury’s verdict, saying that if Drew were found guilty then anyone who violated MySpace’s terms of service could also be found guilty of a misdemeanor, according to reports in the Los Angeles Times and other news sites.

Prosecutors had argued during the trial that violating the terms of service of the social-networking site in order to harm someone else was the legal equivalent of hacking a computer.

A jury in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California last November convicted Drew of taking on a false MySpace identity and taunting a 13-year-old neighbor, Megan Meier, who ultimately hanged

herself.

Drew was convicted three counts of illegally accessing a computer system by creating a MySpace account under an assumed name. The jury acquitted her on a felony charge and a count of conspiracy.

She was accused of setting up a MySpace account along with two other people using the name of "Josh Evans," who was supposedly a teenage boy, for the purpose of luring Meier into an online relationship in 2006. Drew and the others sought to get Meier to discuss Drew's daughter online with the fictitious boy. After a month of flirting, "Josh" ended the relationship on Oct. 16, 2006, with Meier, and one of the three who created the persona told the teenager that the world would be better off without her. Meier hanged herself the next day in her family's home in a St. Louis suburb. The Drews lived on the same block.

Prosecutors in Missouri investigated the matter, but found that Drew had not violated any state laws. However, the case was pursued by the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles, which indicted Drew for accessing MySpace servers illegally. MySpace is based in Beverly Hills, California, so the case was heard there.

The case has drawn a lot of attention, as well as criticism from groups and legal scholars who contended that the government was misinterpreting the U.S. antihacking law to prosecute Drew.

New Trojan Puts Sneaky Twist on Click Fraud

A new piece of malicious software has been discovered that cheats Google and potentially other search engines out of money.

The Trojan horse perpetuates click fraud, a scam in which Web advertisements are clicked in excess or under misleading circumstances in order to generate revenue for those who own the Web pages the ads appear on.

The malware, called "FFSearcher," is "one of the more clever" ones seen of late, wrote Joe Stewart, director of malware analysis at SecureWorks, on a company blog.

The Trojan that SecureWorks analyzed revolves around the use of a widget made available to webmasters from Google. Google offers a custom search box that can be embedded in Web sites, which enables access to its search engine and also shows AdSense advertisements,

If someone clicks on an AdSense ad, Google will pay the Web site operator "a small sum of money," Stewart wrote.

For PCs that have been infected with FFSearcher, all searches the person does on Google are invisibly channeled through another Web site called My Web Way, which uses Google's search widget. The user sees search results that appear to come from Google but actually are first channeled through My Web Way. Even the URL box indicates the results come through Google's domain, Stewart wrote.

What the creators of FFSearcher are hoping is that those infected users will also click on AdSense ads, which My Web Way will get credit for.

Google loses since it pays those fees. My Web Way appeared to be no longer active as of Wednesday afternoon.

FFSearcher works with the Firefox and Internet Explorer browsers. An analysis of the code showed that Yahoo also appeared to be a target, Stewart wrote.

The problem with FFSearcher is that it may be difficult for search engine companies to detect the fraud since the behavior of users is no different than normal, Stewart wrote. Google and other companies use technology that can, for example, detect when an automated program or bot is repeatedly clicking on an ad in a behavior inconsistent with the way a human would interact.

"FFSearcher undoubtedly raises the bar for the fraud detection teams working at the major search engines," Stewart wrote. "It will be interesting to see how they combat it and other trojans using the same technique in the future."

Microsoft’s Bing Search Wins Share from Google

Microsoft Corp’s new Bing search engine gained U.S. market share in its first month in operation but still trails dominant rival Google Inc, according to data released on Wednesday.

Bing, launched on June 3 but available to some users a few days earlier, took 8.23 percent of U.S. Web searches in June, up from 7.81 percent for Microsoft search just prior to its rollout and 7.21 percent in April, said Internet data firm StatCounter.

Google lost share slightly, dipping to 78.48 percent from 78.72 percent before Bing. Yahoo Inc, the perennial No. 2 in the market, rose to 11.04 percent from 10.99 percent.

Bing’s share peaked in the first week of June at 9.21 percent, falling away in the middle two weeks before coming back at 8.45 percent in the last week of June.

The results may give heart to Microsoft, which is investing heavily in its loss-making online services business and is refusing to cede the market to Google.

"At first sight, a 1 percent increase in market share does not appear to be a huge return on the investment Microsoft has made in Bing but the underlying trend appears positive," StatCounter Chief Executive Adohan Cullen said in a statement.

The world’s largest software company may yet strike an online search partnership with Yahoo to make itself a credible competitor, but talk of such a deal has quietened down.

StatCounter, based in Dublin, says its data are based on 4 billion pageloads per month monitored through a network of websites. Other data research firms such as comScore are not expected to release figures on Bing’s share until mid-July.

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